

# Jesus in the Quran: an Akbari Perspective

MIAS [ibnarabisociety.org/articles/rezashah.html](http://ibnarabisociety.org/articles/rezashah.html)

Ibn 'Arabi refers to Jesus as "symbol of engendering" (*mathalan bi-takwin*). It is my intention in this paper to show that, in the metaphysical perspective of Ibn 'Arabi's school, one of the most important principles of which the "Qur'anic" Jesus stands forth as a "symbol", sign, and concrete embodiment, is the following: mercy and compassion are the fruits of the realization of the true Self - or self of the Real, the *Nafs al-Haqq*, as Ibn 'Arabi calls it. Compassion, in turn, should be understood not only morally *but* also, and *a priori*, metaphysically, in terms of the bestowal of life: God gives life to the cosmos out of compassion for His own hidden qualities that long to be known; and man participates in this process both positively - through being compassionate towards his own self, as well as towards others - and inversely, by enlivening his own soul and that of others through the knowledge of God. The Qur'anic narratives concerning Jesus, together with the esoteric interpretations thereof from the Akbari perspective, illuminate these intertwined realities of selfhood and compassion in a particularly fruitful manner. Jesus is described in the Qur'an "as a sign for mankind and a mercy from Us". Ibn 'Arabi draws out, in a most instructive way, how these two aspects of Jesus can be spiritually understood: what Jesus is a sign of, and how this relates to mercy or compassion.

I shall begin this paper by referring to the Qur'anic passages in the *Sura Maryam* that relate the stories of the births of John and Jesus. For it was reflection upon these passages that formed the starting-point for the series of observations that are the subject of this paper. One observes a number of remarkable similarities in these two passages. There is in both cases - to Zakariah, the father of John, and Mary, mother of Jesus - the apparition of an angel to announce the news of the imminent birth of a son; the words addressed to them by the angel, and the responses given by them are similar; several of the phrases used to describe John and Jesus are identical; a vow of silence is observed by both Zakariah and Mary after their vision of the angel, etc. But there are also notable differences between the two narratives, in particular the following one: whereas it is the angel who describes John, it is Jesus who describes himself, through the miraculous words uttered by him as a baby still in his cradle. Indeed, it is the degree of miraculousness that, in general, distinguishes the two narratives: the birth of Jesus to the Virgin was a more absolute kind of miracle as compared with the lesser prodigy of John's being begotten by Zakariah, though "my wife is barren and I have reached infirm old age" (XIX:8). But one should pay particular attention to the words at the end of Jesus' discourse: "Peace be upon me the day I was born, the day I die and the day I shall be raised up alive." In the case of John, it is the angel who invokes peace upon him: "Peace be upon **him** the day **he** was born, the day **he** dies and the day **he** shall be raised up alive."

The reader is struck by the contrast between the invocation of peace upon oneself and the invoking of peace on another. Furthermore, it is peace with the definite article, *al-salam*, that Jesus invokes upon himself, whereas it is the indefinite form, *salamun*, that is invoked by the angel on John. It is as if there is a deliberate juxtaposition here between the the divine attribute of peace, in respect of Jesus, and the general quality of peace - ultimately

divine, in its essence, but considered here at the level of its formal manifestation -in regard to John. This contrast might be interpreted as an allusion to the fullness of divine life, and the totality of supreme Self-consciousness that infused the human substance of Christ from his very inception, this substance itself being the very Word of God. In this connection, Ibn 'Arabi alerts our attention to an extremely important analogy. The Qur'an tells us that Jesus was indeed God's word, "cast unto Mary, and a spirit from Him."(IV:171). Ibn 'Arabi comments upon this, saying that Gabriel transmitted this Word to Mary just as a prophet transmits God's word to his community. Ibn 'Arabi thus shows that there is something in the very substance of Jesus that is, in and of itself, a revelation, "a sign for mankind", as the Qur'an says (XIX:21). Such a view of Jesus narrows, in certain respects at least, the gap that separates a Muslim from a Christian conception of the "message" of Christ.

In the *Fusûs al-Hikam* , we find Ibn 'Arabi commenting on this contrast between the two greetings of peace. In the chapter on John we read:

If the speech were that of the spirit: Peace be upon me the day I was born, the day I die, and the day I shall be raised up alive - that is more complete as regards the reality of union and as regards doctrine, and more lofty in interpretation.

'Abd al-Razzaq Kashani provides just such a "lofty interpretation" with his comment on this invocation of peace upon oneself:

God bestows on Himself the salutation of peace, because of His own Self-determination within the *'Isawi* substance; and this also shows the perfection of Jesus' station in the witnessing of this oneness.

In other words, it is God Himself who greets Himself within and through the very form of Jesus. Now this touches on many key themes of Ibn 'Arabi's metaphysics, but let us note the following point: the greeting offered to God by Himself through another can be taken as a symbol of the principle that God reveals Himself through the whole of creation. As we saw earlier, Ibn 'Arabi says that Jesus is a symbol of *takwin*, of engendering, or of creative activity. This comes in the following poem, which opens the chapter of the *Fusus* on Jesus:

From the water of Mary or from the breath of Gabriel,  
In the form of a mortal fashioned of clay,  
The Spirit came to be in an essence  
Purified of nature, which you call *Sijjin*...  
A Spirit from God, not from anything else.  
Thus he raised up the dead and made birds from clay...  
God purified him in body and exalted him in spirit,  
And made of him a symbol of engendering.

Let us briefly consider this "symbol of engendering" in four ways. First, the creation of Jesus himself - by means of a breath, a word, a spirit, cast into Mary - is a miraculous sign of God's creativity in general, of the way in which the spirit enlivens matter. Secondly, the creation of Jesus is a recapitulation of the specific miracle of the creation of Adam. Thirdly, at the level of cosmogenesis, the birth of Jesus to the Virgin Mary expresses the principle by which the cosmos itself is brought into being. According to Ibn 'Arabi, the universe originates in the epiphany of the "Muhammadan Reality" (*al-haqiqah al-muhammadiyah*),

this reality being the most receptive of all realities - contained within the primal "Cloud" - to the creative Light of God. It is by virtue of the Prophet's total receptivity to this Light that his passivity (*infi'aliyya*) is transformed into activity (*fa'iliyya*):

Muhammad was created as a slave, in principle; he never raised his head seeking leadership, nay, he ceaselessly prostrated in humility, standing [before his Lord] in his condition of passivity, until God engendered (*kawwana*) from him all that He engendered, bestowing upon him a rank of activity (*fa'iliyya*) in the world of Breaths...

One is reminded here of the words addressed to Mary in the Qur'an by the angels:

O Mary, Truly God has chosen you and purified you, and preferred you above all women of creation. O Mary, be obedient to your Lord, prostrate to Him and bow with those who bow (III:42-3).

It is not Jesus alone who was made a "sign" but he and his mother together:

And We made the son of Mary and his mother a sign (XXIII:50).

Thus Jesus can be seen as a symbol of the cosmos itself, the "fruit" of the activity that is rooted in total, virgin receptivity to the Word from above, Mary's role here mirroring that of the Muhammadan Reality.

Finally, continuing this process of *fa'iliyya*, Jesus' own activity positively reflects this divine creativity: his healing of the blind, the leper, his creating a bird from clay, and most importantly, his raising up of the dead. As the Qur'an tells us, Jesus says:

Truly I come unto you with a sign from your Lord. Truly, I create for you out of clay the shape of a bird, and I breathe into it, and it becomes a bird, by God's permission. I heal him who was born blind and the leper, and I give life to the dead, by God's permission (III:49).

It is very instructive to see how Kashani draws out the esoteric meaning of these miraculous acts. In his **Tafsir** he gives the following commentary:

*Truly I create for you*, through spiritual discipline and purification and realized wisdom, from the clay of souls still deficient but nonetheless receptive, *the shape of a bird*, one that flies to the realm of holiness through the intensity of its longing. *Then I breathe into it* the breath of divine knowledge and true life, through the influence of my presence and my teaching. *And it becomes a bird* that is, a living soul, flying with the wings of longing and aspiration towards the Real. *I heal the blind*, the one who is veiled from the light of the Real, one whose eye of insight had always been closed, and had never seen the sun of the face of the Real, nor its light...*and the leper*, the one whose soul is disfigured by the disease of vices and corrupt beliefs, blemished by the love of this world and besmirched by the stain of concupiscence. *And I give life* to the death of ignorance with the life of knowledge.

In the spirit of this kind of commentary, one might venture to add that the words of the Qur'an, *by God's permission*, which qualify the miraculous acts of Jesus, can be understood, esoterically, as meaning that these acts were performed by Jesus in perfect conformity with his knowledge of who the agent really is; who the true Self is, within him, that is performing these acts. In other words, Jesus was not veiled from the Divine reality

by his own performance of these acts: he knew that God was acting through him. The fact that God is the sole agent emerges in the Akbari perspective as an inescapable subjective corollary of the objective oneness of being, or, to use Ibn 'Arabi's own words, of the reality "that there is nothing in Being but He." Ibn 'Arabi comments in many places on the ontological implications of the verse in the Qur'an, which states "You did not throw when you threw, but God threw" (VIII:17). The following few instances will suffice for our purposes:

*You did not throw, so He negated, when you threw, so He affirmed, but God threw, so He negated the engendered existence (kawn) of Muhammad, and affirmed Himself as identical ('ayn) with Muhammad...*

Such ambivalent negations and affirmations give rise to bewilderment:

*You are not you when you are you but God is you.*

But they reveal the truth that it is God alone who is the agent of all acts, the agent who acts through all the faculties of man. This truth is affirmed by Ibn 'Arabi by reference to the words of the famous *hadith qudsi*, known as the *hadith al-taqarrub*, "drawing near", in which God says that when He loves a servant, He is "the hearing with which he hears, the sight by which he sees, the hand with which he strikes and the foot whereon he walks." Ibn 'Arabi draws attention to the important fact that God speaks in the present tense, saying "I am his hearing, his sight, and his hand":

*God's words "I am" show that this was already the situation, but the servant was not aware. Hence the generous gift which this nearness gives to him is the unveiling of the knowledge that God is his hearing and his sight.*

What this implies is that there is no change of ontological agency: God does not "become" the faculties of the servant after having allowed the servant to enjoy, in his previous condition, the prerogative of autonomous agency. God is, and cannot but be, the true agent of all the servant's actions and perceptions. The only change is in the awareness of the servant, his assimilation of the truth that God's sole reality includes all other agencies and excludes all ontological alterity, a truth from which the servant had been veiled by his own faculties. But it is important to add that, if one must not be veiled by the creature and its activities from true Selfhood, one must also avoid the opposite veil; that is, one must not allow the Real to veil the creature from the property that accompanies him perpetually, the property of slavehood. The relationship between the receptivity of pure slavehood and the activity of engendering was noted above; but at this point, what should be stressed is that one of the fruits of this paradoxical combination of realized Selfhood and immutable slavehood is compassion, as the following lines from the chapter on Jesus tell us:

*I worship truly, and God is our Master;  
and I am His very identity, so understand.  
When I say "man", do not be veiled by man,  
for He has given you proof.  
So be the Real and be a creature.  
You will be, by God, compassionate.*

The last line expresses the essence of the argument of this paper: "being" the Real - while remaining a creature - means "being" compassionate, merciful, kind. The one cannot "be" without the other. When Ibn 'Arabi writes *takun bi'Llahi rahmanan*, this sounds rather like an oath: by God, you will be compassionate - in the measure that you realize the true Self, which is veiled by your outer self, your ego. It should be noted that it is not a question here of realizing "one's true Self", inasmuch as the Self cannot be the property of any individual; the only thing that the individual can be said to possess is the property of essential poverty. In this perspective, no individual owns anything, on the contrary, all individuals "belong" to the Self. This point emerges clearly from the following *ta'wil* by Kashani of the verses in the Qur'an in which God addresses Jesus"

O Jesus, son of Mary, did you say unto people: worship me and my mother as two gods beside God? He said: Glory to You, never could I say what I had no right to say...(V:116) *Did you* invite people to your own soul and to your mother - or to the station of your heart and your soul; for truly he in whom subsists the reality of egoity (*ana'iyya*) and the residue of the soul and passion, or in whom there takes place the fluctuations of the heart and its manifestation through its quality - such a one invites the creature to the station of his soul or to the station of his heart, not to the Real. *He said: Glory to You, never could I say what I had no right to say,* for indeed I have no being in reality, nor is it appropriate or correct for me to utter speech which I do not really possess; for truly speech and act, quality and being - all of this belongs to You.

If, then, compassion flows from the creature, this is nothing but the compassion of God, not that of the creature; and this compassion flows all the more strongly in the measure that the creature does not appropriate it to himself. Ibn 'Arabi tells his readers to be the Real *and* a creature, only then will compassion flow from them; and then, not from them in respect of their own creaturely properties, but from them *bi'Llah*, by or through God. If the consciousness of being the Real is not balanced by the consciousness that one is a creature, a slave, at the same time and for as long as one persists as an individual, then the result is in fact far from compassion, it is pride, self-delusion, and self-divinization. In other words, humility and compassion are two complementary virtues that flow from a proper awareness of reality: a "proper" awareness being one that puts each thing in its right place, knowing that the creature is nothing *but* the Real, in respect of ItsSelf-manifestation within and through it, and that the creature is nothing *before* the Real. In both cases, the individual as such is reduced to nothing: self-effacement is the *conditio sine qua non* of Self-realization.

If one only has awareness of being a creature, however, with no sense of the inner reality of divine Selfhood, then one's virtues, compassion included, will lack that all-embracing totality and that infinite depth which comes from realized spiritual knowledge. The more one is aware of the sole reality of God as the true ontological agent, the only true Self, the more naturally and spontaneously will compassion flow forth. In other words, the closer the individual comes to the source of compassion, the more fully will compassion be manifested through him; that is, such a one becomes not only a *marhum*, one upon whom compassion or mercy is bestowed, but also a *rahim*, one who bestows mercy to others. This is what distinguishes the "veiled ones" (*al-mahjubun*) from the "folk of unveiling" (*ahl al-kashf*). As Ibn 'Arabi says:

The veiled ones, in accordance with their belief, ask the Real to have compassion upon them, while the folk of unveiling ask that the compassion of God abide through them. They ask for this with the name *Allah*, saying "O *Allah*, have compassion upon us", and He only has compassion upon them by causing compassion to abide through them. Compassion has a property which in reality belongs to the essence of "that which abides through a locus" (*al-qa'im bi'l-mahall*).

Kashani comments:

The property of compassion rules over them, for that which abides through a locus exercises its ruling property over the receptacle, in accordance with its reality; so He only has compassion upon them by causing compassion to abide through them, thus making them compassionate ones (*rahimin*)...

Those who have been rendered compassionate in this way are said to find the property of compassion by way of mystical "taste" (*dhawqan*); their spiritual intuition not only gives them a taste of the essence of compassion, but shows them also that compassion is the very essence of the Real. There are many indications that compassion expresses the fundamental nature of God. The Qur'an tells us that "My compassion encompasses all things" (VII:156). The name of God, *al-Rahman*, is practically synonymous with *Allah*: "Call upon *Allah* or call upon *al-Rahman*" (XVII:10). Repeatedly in the Qur'an *al-Rahman* is referred to as the divine creative force from which all things arise. According to Ibn 'Arabi, it was precisely because of His compassion that God created the world: the whole of creation is thus itself *amarhum*, an object of compassion. Every *mawjud* is a *marhum*: every thing that is made existent is an object of compassion. This perspective on creation might be seen as a commentary on one of the most important "explanations" of the reason behind the creation of the world by God. According to a famous holy utterance, a *hadith qudsi* which Ibn 'Arabi often cites, God says: "I was a hidden treasure and I loved to be known, so I created." Here the purpose of creation is explicitly tied to God's desire to be known; He wished to manifest His inner perfections; and this is one way of becoming known, that is, knowing Himself outwardly, as distinct from knowing Himself inwardly. As the opening lines of the chapter on Adam in the ***Fusûs*** have it:

The Real willed, by virtue of His Beautiful Names, which are innumerable, to see their identities - if you wish you can say: to see His identity - in a comprehensive engendered being that comprises the entire affair... His mystery is manifest to Himself through it, for the vision a thing has of itself in itself is not like the vision it has of itself in another thing, which will serve as a mirror for it.

One of Ibn 'Arabi's most startling declarations comes, though, when he says that the first object of God's compassion was not in fact the creation, it was God Himself. In other words, God had compassion for His own Names and Qualities that wished to manifest themselves, but were hidden in His own essence. In other words, He had compassion for His own hidden "treasures". As Ibn 'Arabi writes:

Through the breath of the All-Merciful, God gave relief (*tanfis*) to the divine names... He relieved the divine names of the lack of displaying effects.

So the supreme archetype or model of all compassion, of all love and feeling for the "other",

is this love of God's Essence for Its own Self-manifestation, for Its own theophany to an "other", and through the "other": everything is ultimately manifested by compassion, is woven of compassion, and returns to compassion: "My compassion encompasses all things", as we saw earlier. Ibn 'Arabi stresses that everything returns to mercy and compassion, but this does not deny the terrible reality of hell nor does it preclude the wrathful side of God. Ibn 'Arabi often cites the *hadith* in which it is stated that God's compassion takes precedence over His wrath, but he does not deny the reality of this wrath: he attributes it, though, not to God's intrinsic nature, but to the creature's wilful rejection of the mercy that is being offered to him "ontologically", that is, by virtue of the compassion that is inherent to the very nature of being. As Kashani says, in his commentary on the opening line of the chapter on Zakariah:

For compassion is of the Essence, as it is generous by nature, overflowing with generosity from the treasure of compassion and bounty. Being is the first effusion of the all-embracing compassion which encompasses everything. But as for wrath, it does not essentially pertain to the Real, rather, it consists in a property of a non-existential nature (*hukm 'adami*), arising out of the absence of receptivity (*ladam qabiliyya*), on the part of certain things, to the perfect manifestation of the effects of Being and its properties within them... This absence of the effusion of compassion over a given thing, resulting from its lack of receptivity, is called "wrath" in relation to that thing, in the face of the compassionate one (*al-rahim*).

Therefore the compassion of being not only takes ontological precedence over the non-existential property of wrath, it also prevails, ultimately over the accidental properties of evil and suffering, the concomitants of non-being: "Everyone will end up with mercy". This truth is grasped in the measure of one's awareness - spiritually and not just notionally - of the absolute and infinite reality of goodness and the relative and limited reality of evil.

[go to part two](#)